



Families, parents and carers

Improving children's outcomes by supporting parental and carer-couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence

Key messages

- A good deal of information about families is kept in the national archives but there are gaps in the evidence base with regard to the incidence of domestic violence and the incidence of divorce among couples with children (as opposed to all couples).
- More negative outcomes for children, including lower educational attainment, conduct problems and emotional difficulties, are associated with the experience of parental divorce. However, the majority of children with this experience develop well.
- The most negative outcomes for children of divorced parents emerge from difficulties that pre-date the relationship breakdown.
- Negative outcomes can also be associated with children from intact families, especially where parental or carer relationships are characterised by conflict and/or violence.
- A substantial minority of children who witness domestic violence have parents or carers who have additional difficulties that compromise their parenting capacity.
- Children and most couples show signs of stress, with poorer parenting in the two to three year period around the time of relationship dissolution. Although these symptoms usually disappear, for some individuals, effects can be long-lasting and professional support can be valuable at this time.

- Boys tend to show more signs of disturbance than girls, particularly where conflict between parents has involved physical violence and where the conflict persists after the breakup. There is a lack of consensus among researchers on the question of whether there are gender differences associated with the long-term impact of exposure to violence.
- Quality of contact post-separation is more closely associated with good outcomes for children than quantity of contact post-separation.
- There is a lack of relevant research and large gaps in the evidence base concerning which interventions work best in the UK for individual families affected by violence, conflict and relationship breakdown.
- Couples in the UK tend not to seek professional help for relationship difficulties except as a last resort – providers need to find ways to change attitudes towards seeking help, across all minority ethnic communities.
- Teaching children about relationships, from an early age, may be the best way to effect change. According to user feedback, services that facilitate anonymous access to information and advice are very popular, for example, web- and media-based services. More research is needed to assess the role and effect of these services.
- There is evidence that better training of health and other professionals can increase the likelihood of problem identification and facilitate earlier access to appropriate services.

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Introduction

This summary is taken from the research review which tells us what works in improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer-couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence. It is based on a rapid review of the research literature involving systematic searching of literature and presentation of key data. It summarises the best available evidence that will help service providers to improve services and, ultimately, outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Researchers based at the Family and Parenting Institute and at the University of Newcastle carried out this review on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted the data work.

Who are the key stakeholders?

- people of all ages with experiences of parental conflict, separation and divorce and domestic violence (including children and young people)
- policy-makers, campaigners and those who advise them
- practitioners working with children and families
- all couples and couples-to-be and all people caring for children.

Their contributions are valuable in the process of improvement

It is vital to constantly consult with all those affected as their perceptions of services and their views on what helped or hindered them in getting appropriate help are key to tailoring services appropriately. Wherever possible, it will be valuable to include children and young people in this consultation process. It is particularly important to ensure that services take account of the needs of individuals from families in communities that discourage help-seeking. These include, among others, white families in low-to-middle income groups and those in upper middle income groups as well as minority ethnic families.

Policy-makers, campaigners and those who advise them

The actions of policy-makers, campaigners and their informants will be more effective if they are aware of gaps in the knowledge base and are able to take steps to ensure that more accurate and relevant information is recorded and made publicly accessible.

Practitioners working with children and families

With more relevant information, particularly about the cost and effectiveness of interventions for work with individual families, and more training to enable early problem identification, practitioners in all settings (i.e. all organisations in the private, community and voluntary sectors as well as those in local and central government-funded sectors) should be better equipped to set up early screening procedures, and to directly provide and signpost to appropriate services.

All couples and couples-to-be and all people caring for children

More effective couple relationship support services will be of benefit to the whole population of adults and children, and to the wider society too.

“ It is particularly important to ensure that services take account of the needs of individuals from families in communities that discourage help-seeking. ”



What data is available to inform the way forward?

Much data is available on characteristics of family composition in Great Britain. Divorce rates and trends are available by gender of adults, and data is available on family composition including age and number of children (in families overall – no separate records are kept on families where parents or carers have separated). This information can be found in the National Statistics' population and social trends. Data on mental health outcomes by family type is available at the national level, as is data on the qualification levels of 17-year-olds. Data on educational outcomes by family type for younger children is not available. Data on links between family characteristics and outcomes for children is therefore sparse.

Although there is national data on domestic violence by adult gender, the data is not available by family composition. There is data available that local authorities can use to measure their progress towards the two national indicators relating to decreasing the incidence of domestic violence, national indicator 32, 'Repeat incidents of domestic violence' and national indicator 34, 'Domestic violence – murder'.

C4EO's interactive data site (www.C4EO.org.uk/data) enables local authority managers to evaluate their current position in relation to a range of key national indicators and to easily access publicly available comparative data relating to families, parents and carers.

The evidence base

There is a large body of information available to inform this review and the questions it poses. Because the field is so well-established, most of the evidence comes from syntheses of research findings. Researchers in these fields have become increasingly sensitive to methodological and definitional issues, which has created a move toward more precise use of terms as well as more careful examination of multiple co-occurring influences in the lives of conflicted families.

However, there is still a need for more research to separate out conclusions that relate only to couples as opposed to parenting couples. These gaps in the evidence base could be filled if records of divorce and domestic violence routinely included information about the parent/carer status of the adults involved.

There is also a lack of documented information about interventions for families affected by divorce and domestic violence in the UK and a need for more information about how these work for families in different circumstances and from different cultural communities.

Although some small-scale qualitative studies exist, there is a need for more information, from larger samples that reflect all UK communities, from the perspective of children and young people affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict.



Next steps

An updated version of this review is due to be published in spring 2011. This will include validated practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers.

Two other C4EO reviews are available on the C4EO website as part of C4EO's Families, Parents and Carers work:

- Improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children through improving the physical and mental health of mothers, fathers and carers.
- Improving children's and young people's achievement, behavioural and emotional outcomes through effective support and intervention with mothers, fathers and carers.

Local decision-makers and commissioners working in local authorities and children's services may also find it helpful to read the Families, Parents and Carers Directors' Summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews (www.C4EO.org.uk).

C4EO is using the main messages from the three Families, Parents and Carers reviews to underpin its knowledge sharing and capacity building work with those working in children's services, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working to support couples and children in families experiencing conflict, including domestic violence.

“ *Wherever possible, it will be valuable to include children and young people in this consultation process.* ”

Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to www.C4EO.org.uk to download full and in-depth versions.

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